

Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Service Organizations
Meeting Minutes
December 7, 2004

A meeting of the Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Service Organizations (JLC) was held on Tuesday, December 7, 2004, at the offices of the American Legion Department of Virginia, 1708 Commonwealth Avenue, Richmond, Virginia.

Members Present

John Anderson, *Chairman, Board of Veterans Services*; Jim Aucoin, *American Veterans*; John Bonnell, *Marine Corps League*; George Dumas, *Homeless and Disabled Veterans*; David Ellis, *NAUS*; Pat Green, *Roanoke Valley Veterans Council*; Michael Hulsey, *Reserve Officers Association of the U.S.*; Jon Mangis, *Commissioner, Department of Veterans Services*; Daniel Miller, *Disabled American Veterans*; Connie O'Neill, *American Legion*; Richard Rinaldo, *Legion of Valor of the U. S., Inc.*; Ronald Shamblin, *Virginia National Guard Association*; and Peter Snelling, *Veterans of Foreign Wars*.

Members Absent

Mason Botts, *Air Force Association*; John Dunleavy, *Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge*; Paul Fink, *U. S. Navy Cruiser Sailors Association*; Robert Gray, *American Ex-Prisoners of War*; John Jackson, *Paralyzed Veterans of America*; Norman Jasper, *Military Order of the Purple Heart*; James Jones, *Korean War Veterans Association*; R. Goodwin Sacra, *Navy Seabee Veterans of America*; Richard Schneider, *Non-Commissioned Officers Association*; Thomas Snee, *Fleet Reserve Association*; and Frank Wickersham, *MOAA*.

Others Present

C. L. "Bert" Boyd, Chief Deputy Commissioner, Virginia Department of Veterans Services; Steven Combs, Assistant to the Commissioner, Virginia Department of Veterans Services; Rhonda Earman, General Administration Supervisor, Virginia Department of Veterans Services; Don Ferguson, Assistant Attorney General; John McAnaw, VFW; Anne McKinney, Paralyzed Veterans of America; and Roger Sullivan, veterans advocate.

Materials Distributed

Meeting Agenda; draft Minutes of the September 7, 2004, meeting; JLC 2005 Legislative Agenda; JLC proposed Mission and Vision Statements; and *HireVetsFirst* information.

Call to Order

With 11 of 22 members present, Chairman O'Neill called the meeting to order at 11:10 a.m. Mr. O'Neill welcomed guests, John McAnaw of the VFW, Anne McKinney of the Paralyzed Veterans of America and Roger Sullivan.

Approval of Minutes

Because there was not a quorum of members present at the meeting, the minutes of the September 7, 2004, meeting could not be approved. However, the following changes to the minutes were proposed:

Page 1 – Members Present

Thomas Snee was not present at the meeting and, therefore, his name should be deleted from this section.

Steven Combs' name should be deleted from this section.

Jim Walker's name should be deleted from this section.

Page 1 – Others Present

Jim Walker's name should be added to this section.

Page 2 – Federal Programs and Legislation

Steven Combs related a suggestion by Jim Walker that the entire text of this section be deleted and replaced simply by "Congressman Moran discussed veterans issues at the federal level." Several Council members indicated that the minutes should remain as written.

Chairman's Report

Chairman O'Neill then raised the question of voting without a quorum, asking Mr. Ferguson if voting may be done via audio conference, through e-mail polling or by proxy. Mr. Ferguson responded the Virginia Freedom of Information Act provides that voting may only be done with a quorum of members present at a face-to-face meeting. There may, however, be open discussion with proposals carried over to the next meeting. The Chairman also may call a special meeting to obtain votes on proposals.

Pat Green suggested that members be polled in order to determine if a quorum will be present, with the total number expected being provided to the Chairman at least one week prior to the meeting. The Chairman could then decide whether to go forward with the meeting. Mr. Green said that if members do not respond to an initial e-mail notice, DVS staff should contact members, individually, by phone. John Anderson supported this idea.

Commissioner Mangis added that it is the practice of the Secretary of the Commonwealth to purge members from the rolls of all boards and councils within the Commonwealth who do not attend meetings on a regular basis. Mr. Mangis said that DVS staff will begin sending e-mail notices of meetings to members, followed by a post mailing of hard copies of agenda packets and then follow up with telephone calls to those who have not yet responded. Mr. Rinaldo suggested that the JLC consider voting to reduce the number necessary to constitute a quorum.

Discussion then turned to the JLC 2005 Legislative Agenda. Mr. O'Neill said that the agenda has been submitted to the Board of Veterans Services for consideration. John Anderson stated that the Board would be discussing the agenda at its December 13, 2004, meeting and making recommendations on it. Mr. O'Neill noted that, once the Board receives budget information from the Commissioner's Office later in the week, it will be applied accordingly to the funding items listed in the agenda.

Item 1 – \$1 Million Increase in funding for DVS. David Ellis asked Commissioner Mangis how the \$1 million listed in Item 1 would be allocated, and raised a concern that a more specific amount, representing the total sum of necessary funding, be used instead. Mr. O'Neill responded that this figure could be adjusted, once the agency's budget proposal becomes known. In addition, exact figures may be added to the legislative agendas of the JLC member organizations once they become aware of the DVS budget figures.

The Chairman then recognized John McAnaw. Mr. McAnaw said that the VFW plans to hold its "Day on the Hill" on January 13 and, therefore, it is imperative that the DVS budget figures be released in time to include specific funding requests when meeting with legislators. Mr. McAnaw added that the VFW had done a considerable amount of research last year on the needs of Virginia veterans, which resulted in a recommendation for an increase in DVS funding of at least \$1 million. Mr. McAnaw noted that the number of DVS claims officers has been cut, even though the number of veterans living in Virginia in need of services has increased. Mr. McAnaw reminded the Council that DVS is a portal to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for Virginia veterans and that sufficient funding is vital to meeting their needs. DVS also needs to reach out to veterans in remote areas of the state and find ways to make claims officers more accessible to them. Mr. McAnaw added that sufficient staffing of state cemeteries also is critical.

John Anderson echoed Mr. McAnaw's remarks and stated that funding to support an increase in the number of claims officers across the state is the Board of Veterans Services' number one priority. George Dumas emphasized that the JLC, Board, and Foundation need to collaborate and speak with one voice when communicating the needs of Virginia veterans to law and policy makers.

Mr. O'Neill indicated that a special meeting of the JLC to vote on the dollar amount listed in Item 1 of the agenda may be called, once the DVS budget figures become available.

Item 2 – Funding for a proposed care center in Hampton Roads. It was noted that the 1998 care center study emphasized the need for a care center in the Hampton Roads area. Commissioner Mangis added that care centers established in population centers like Hampton Roads, on the grounds of VA medical centers, typically are more successful than those placed in less densely populated areas. Mr. McAnaw suggested that because some of the information in the 1998 study could be outdated, it might be appropriate to have another study done to demonstrate to the VA the need for a third care center. Commissioner Mangis added that DVS does not have sufficient funding to conduct a new study, and that if one is done, a funding

request would have to be made to the General Assembly. An update to the earlier study might also be an alternative.

Item 3 – Funding for a proposed Virginia War Memorial education wing.

Commissioner Mangis reminded the Council that this item would be a capital construction item, funded separately from the state's operating budget. Council members asked Commissioner Mangis to provide them with the number of visitors to the Memorial, annually, at the next Council meeting.

Item 4 – Veterans hiring preference in Virginia. Council members agreed that this item should be revised to define "employers" as "public employers," and suggested adding the following language: "the state shall have a veterans hiring preference and empower local governments" There was discussion about whether there should be a scoring formula used by state agencies in determining the qualifications of veterans compared to other applicants, and how the "Dillon Rule" would be applied in this process. Mr. Ferguson explained that the Dillon Rule refers to a state statute stating that localities have only the powers conferred upon them by the General Assembly and the Virginia Constitution. Everyone agreed that it would be a good idea for the Department of Veterans Services to develop and implement a point-based scoring formula for evaluating veterans applications for employment.

Dan Miller suggested that the JLC should ask the Governor, through a resolution, to declare a "Hire Vets First Month" to demonstrate that Virginia is a veteran-friendly state. A proposal was made that a letter from Commissioner Mangis and/or Chairman O'Neill to the Governor be prepared for this purpose. Everyone agreed that this was a good idea and asked that Dr. Anderson bring this proposal before the Board of Veterans Services for endorsement.

Item 5 – Drivers license renewal for returning veterans. Everyone agreed that all military personnel (active duty, Guard and Reserve) returning from overseas assignments should be included in the eligibility for the 30-day grace period and that the words "military personnel" should be substituted for "veterans."

Item 6 – Security for the Virginia War Memorial. Mr. O'Neill said that he would be replacing the term "security guards" with "Capitol Police," at the request of Jon Hatfield, Executive Director of the War Memorial.

Items 8 and 9 – awards for combat service and heroism. There was discussion about whether to combine Items 8 and 9, and whether the proposed medals are necessary, in light of existing medals that are awarded to Virginia service men and women by the Department of Military Affairs. It was decided that both items should remain in the agenda, adding a recognition of valor to Item 8, and requesting that the General Assembly be charged with developing the process for making recommendations for medal recipients.

Mr. O'Neill noted that the proposal by Pat Green at the September 7, 2004, meeting would be added to the agenda, as follows: "The General Assembly initiate and support the efforts of the

Department of Veterans Services to establish a state veterans cemetery in Southwest Virginia,” or similar language.

There was discussion about whether to add additional items proposed by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, as follows:

- State funding to construct signage for Virginia roadways designated as veterans highways during the 2004 General Assembly session (HB 1413):

Interstate Route 64 was designated as the “Korean War Veterans Memorial Highway”
Interstate Route 81 was designated as the “World War II Veterans Memorial Highway”
Interstate Route 95 was designated as the “Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway”

Mr. McAnaw noted that Delegate Armstrong sponsored this legislation and that funding for the signage may already have been included in one state agency’s budget proposal.

- State funding be appropriated in the amount of 35% of the total construction cost to add additional beds at the proposed care center in Richmond.

Commissioner Mangis explained that the proposed Richmond care center originally was to be a 240-bed facility. However, due to the rise in the construction costs from the amount of the original grant, which was based on 1998 construction cost estimates, the number of beds was initially reduced to 200 by cutting 40 domiciliary beds. After the new construction contractor projected even higher construction costs for the project, 40 additional domiciliary beds were cut, leaving 160 skilled nursing beds. Mr. Mangis said that DVS is now working on a pre-application for additional USDVA funding to add the 80 domiciliary beds, after the facility is constructed. If the funding request is approved, it is hoped that the additional rooms will be added within the next five years. Commissioner Mangis emphasized the any future funding requests for additional care centers will include an inflation allowance.

Mr. Ellis asked how many veterans there are in Virginia in need of care center services. Mr. Boyd responded that in 2000, there were approximately 8,000 veterans living within a 50-mile radius of Richmond, and that that number is expected to increase to approximately 11,000 with the 2010 census figures. Mr. Boyd also said that the USDVA estimates care center needs based on a formula established by the VA grant program. According to this formula, and based upon 2000 census figures, Virginia currently has a need for a total of 1,312 care center beds.

Mr. Dumas added that DVS needs to determine the needs of Virginia veterans based on demographics and find out what other states are doing to meet their veterans’ needs. In that regard, Mr. Green reminded the Council that National Guardsmen and Reservists activated for 180 days or more become eligible for the same VA benefits available to active duty personnel.

- The General Assembly memorialize the Congress of the United States to increase the federal burial allowance from \$300 to \$750.

Commissioner Mangis added that he earlier had asked the JLC member organizations to support an increase in the burial allowance to \$500, and said that he will be requesting sponsorship of such a bill through a congressional liaison in the near future. An increase in the burial amount would help offset the deficit burial costs at state cemeteries.

While Council members agreed that these three items are worthy initiatives, no decision was made to include them in the JLC's 2005 Legislative Agenda.

Mr. O'Neill noted that the JLC's Legislative Agenda items will become those of the American Legion. He also said that items are not prioritized, but that he would do so, if Council members wished.

Commissioner's Update

Commissioner Mangis began his report by discussing budget shortfalls and the measures DVS has taken to address this issue. Mr. Mangis said that funding for DVS programs and services has essentially remained the same for the past 12 years, with the exception of a \$137,500 appropriation last year for additional service officers, in conjunction with the passage of Governor Warner's tax proposal. DVS has closed field offices, delayed filling full-time positions, and downgraded full-time positions to part-time status to help alleviate the problem of inadequate funding. Mr. Green suggested that mobile field offices might be an effective, low-cost way to serve veterans in remote areas of the state.

Commissioner Mangis said that the agency's budget proposal has been submitted to the Governor and should be available to the Board at its December 13 meeting. Even if the Governor includes a significant funding request for DVS in his proposal, it still will need to be approved by the 2005 General Assembly. To that end, Commissioner Mangis urged JLC member organizations to advocate with the General Assembly for increased funding for veterans programs and services and to make legislators aware of the needs of the more than 760,000 veterans who live in Virginia. Lawmakers need to be reminded that these veterans and their spouses represent a sizeable voting block. "Days on the Hill" attended by veterans service organizations members, wearing easily recognizable insignias, could be a very effective lobbying tool.

Commissioner Mangis informed the Council that the USDVA has executed a deed transferring title from the McGuire VA Medical Center to the Commonwealth for the Richmond care center site. After a 90-day comment period, the transaction will be complete, with construction beginning in late February or early March 2005. One of the delays in transferring title was the discovery of underground storage tanks, which the VA removed at no cost to the Commonwealth.

With respect to federal funding, Mr. Dumas asked whether the approximately \$1.8 billion the USDVA spends in Virginia is enough to meet the needs of Virginia's veterans. Commissioner Mangis responded that it is not sufficient and urged JLC member organizations to advocate for additional funding at the state and federal level. Mr. Mangis emphasized that veterans benefits serve as a "cost avoidance" mechanism for other government social programs, which is important for law and policy makers to consider when making appropriations for America's veterans. In accordance with Mr. Dumas' request, Mr. Mangis promised to provide statistics on Virginia veterans to the JLC at its next meeting.

Report of the Mission and Vision Statement Committee

Richard Rinaldo distributed a proposed Mission and Vision Statement for consideration by the Council. Mr. Rinaldo suggested that it be referred to in the JLC Annual Report as "proposed."

Public Comments

There were no public comments.

Next Meeting

In discussing the date for the next meeting, Steven Combs reminded the Council that the JLC Constitution and Bylaws call for two meetings during the General Assembly session. The next regular meeting of the JLC was scheduled for January 11, 2005, at 11:00 a.m., in Richmond, with the site to be determined. Members are encouraged to bring a brown bag lunch.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 3:05 p.m.